Applying Visual Methods in the Study of Place Affiliation, Mobility, and Belonging

Stine Thidemann Faber, Karina Torp Møller and Helene Pristed Nielsen

In this short essay we present a Danish research project called 'Images of the Global Periphery'. Through the use of visual methodologies, the project focuses on belonging and home-making among newcomers, thereby addressing how geographic mobility is implicated in 'everyday belonging' and people's experiences of being 'at home'. The essay argues that a visual approach provides valuable empirical additions to our understanding - and it contributes to a further theorizing - of place affiliation, mobility and belonging in a globalized world. Furthermore, while most previous research on globalization, belonging, and mobility have failed to incorporate gender perspectives, our preliminary empirical findings indicate that gender, marital status, parenthood, job situation and country of origin all matter in developing a sense of belonging. Such positionalities play a role in the attempt to understand the uneven and often contradictory ways in which global processes and local identities come together.

Keywords: Gender, Place Affiliation, Mobility, Belonging, Volunteer Employed Photography

Based on an empirical study of place perceptions among newcomers (men and women of foreign origin who have settled in North Denmark within the last 2½ years), this essay addresses how geographic mobility is implicated in 'everyday belonging' and people's experiences of being 'at home'. In so doing, we focus on three questions: first, how is belonging visualized among men and women who are mobile across borders? Second, how is home perceived, constructed and displayed by subjects who are abroad? Third, how are gendered realities made visible in – and perhaps even actively constructed through – the picturing of place affiliation, mobility, and belonging? With these questions we hope to shed light on the correlation between the importance of belonging in everyday life and local areas, on the one hand, and belonging in

national and transnational communities, on the other.

Within the field of sociology today, it is widely assumed that people's sense of belonging and relationships with the place in which they live are being increasingly challenged by global currents. Some argue that the importance of belonging is decreasing and that 'places', due to globalization, have become less important (e.g. Castells 1996, 1997, 1998; Bauman 1998; Giddens 1999; Urry 2000). Others argue the exact opposite, stating that globalization has countervailing consequences on place attachment and identity (e.g. Gustafson 2001; Davids and van Driel 2005). Emphasizing how the places in which people settle down play a key role in relation to their identity, Lee Cuba and David M. Hummon (1993a, 1993b) link the identity question *who am I?* to the questions *where am I?* and, more fundamentally, *where do I belong?* In so doing, they underline the fact that places – like people, objects and activities – play an important role in everyday life, even if the relationship and identification with places occurs on different scales, ranging from the local to the national and the transnational. In spite of the differing views on the importance and influence of globalization on belonging, there seems to be a consensus that the changes of circumstance caused by globalization raise important questions about the character and meaning of places in relation to everyday life: a question that Per Gustafson (2001) argues must be answered empirically.

In writings on globalization, place, mobility and belonging, often gender has not been a prominent theme. Throughout the years, however, feminist scholars have argued that these processes are profoundly gendered, although in different ways for particular contexts and times. Gender relations both reflect and affect the spatial organization of society, and feminist geographers in particular have tried to shed light upon the spatialized construction of femininity and masculinity (as ideology, materiality and practice). They have convincingly shown that 'spaces and places are experienced differently by different people' (Nelson & Seager 2005, 15) (see also McDowell 1999; Freeman 2001; Fenster 2005; Davids & van Driel 2005). Gender is one salient dimension in these experiences of places and associations of belonging (as are class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and so forth) and therefore, according to this argument, it is essential to consider gender as a facet of geographic mobility in order to fully understand everyday belonging.

Visualisations of Everyday Belonging – Between the Local and the Global

The use of visual methodologies in social research is not new, and in recent years the literature has expanded to represent different ap-

proaches, among which the use of photography is only one method. In terms of photography, the researcher may use pre-existing materials or take his/her own photos, like in Charles S. Suchar's (1988, 2004) studies of city life and urban changes in Chicago and Amsterdam, where photos are combined with ethnographic field works to convey the changes in local communities on micro- and macro levels. Another common practice is for the researcher to enter into cooperation with individuals and/or groups, as we have done, and work with them and/or allow them to gather data alone, while at the same time utilising them as the subject(s) of the study (Garrod 2008; Cherem & Traweek 1977). This is called *volunteer-employed photography* (VEP).

Naturally, while developing our research project, we have been inspired by the experiences of other researchers in using photos. For instance, in tourism research perceptions of cities and landscapes are often the object of study, like in Brian Garrod's (2008) research on different perceptions of the Welsh town Aberystwyth (see also Haldrup & Larsen 2010; Taylor et al. 1996). One specific element we have been inspired by in Garrod's work is his experiences with combining the collection of photos with the use of photo logs. Besides tourism research, we have also been inspired by research on identity and self-esteem: for example Malose Langa (2008)

regarding the construction of masculinity among young men, and Les Back (2007) on the significance of tattoos. Most importantly, we have been inspired by Carey M. Noland (2006) who handed out cameras to school girls asking them to take photos expressing 'who they were' or who 'they were not'.

Using VEP, we have handed out cameras to newcomers in the region together with a fairly open task regarding what to photograph. This approach, we argue, offers valuable empirical contributions to our understanding and theorizing of place affiliation, mobility and belonging in a globalized world. As Caroline Knowles and Paul Sweetman (2004) argue, sociological perspectives can be strengthened by the use of visual strategies 'which capture the particular, the local, the personal and the familiar while suggesting a bigger landscape beyond and challenging us to draw the comparison between the two' (Knowles & Sweetman 2004, 8).

When photography is used as a scientific method, it is precisely in an attempt to capture the unspoken and that which is potentially unseen in everyday life:

The new prominence of visual strategies in social research (…) is about new theoretical and technical possibilities, a re-enchantment among social commentators with the texture of social life, the shifting and fragmented frame-

works of knowledge in which we all operate and a determination to reach beyond words in producing accounts of the social world (Knowles & Sweetman 2004, 2).

Back (2007) has put forward the same argument, pointing out how the most important parts of daily life are often left unspoken, which is why we must turn our attention to 'the realm of embodied social life that operates outside of talk' (Back 2007, 95). He too points to photography as an important methodological tool as '…the quality of the images operates outside of language and the conventions of The Word (…) We have to listen to them with our eyes' (Back 2007, 100).

Picture 1 (female, Poland): Those wanting me to participate in the project must think of me as a newcomer.

It may, of course, be questioned as to what extent photography merely *captures*, or rather *constructs*, images. One methodological problem deriving from our approach is that we, to some extent, construct our participants as 'outsiders' simply by contacting them as exemplars of 'newcomers' – a fact that one of the participants also commented on (see picture 1). This may also be regarded as an ethical problem. However, in trying to capture their sense of feeling at home or not, we felt that 'newcomer' was considered a more neutral term than, for example, 'alien' or 'foreign'. Many comments in the photo logs indicate active juxtaposition of North Denmark and the participant's country of origin, potentially exaggerating or constructing differences and similarities that may not otherwise have been felt to be as prominent. Another methodological challenge deriving from VEP concerns the way we have interacted with participants, which in our case has primarily been through cyberspace. Firstly, we advertized through Facebook for volunteers; participants then uploaded photos and comments in the photo log to an online database. This approach is likely to correlate with the fact that most of our participants are highly educated, with 10 out of 25 either holding a PhD degree or studying for one. So while there is diversity in terms of national origin (21 different countries), they are all highly educated. However, this does not nec-

essarily translate to class position, as 13 are unemployed, and 8 are in temporary jobs.

Focusing on Newcomers and using 'Home' as a Metaphor for Belonging

Like Back´s argument that images force us to 'listen with our eyes', part of the reasoning behind our methodological approach is that by handing out cameras to newcomers, we may be forced to look at objects and places which might otherwise have escaped our attention. Each of the 25 participants selected for this project had been residing in North Denmark for less than 2½ years. Presumably, this means that the region still feels like a 'new place' with which they have not yet become familiar, and for this reason everyday life still offers 'disruptions'.

Focusing on newcomers and thereby choosing a team of participants who are precisely *not* rooted in one particular locality, we aim to procure images of habits, daily rituals, objects etc which stand out to the participants when they consider their sense of belonging. The fact that the life stories of our participants all involve moving from abroad to the region of North Denmark may contribute to new perspectives on the relationship between the local, national, and transnational when it comes to home-making and developing a sense of belonging. As Jennie Germann Molz puts it, belonging is especially important to those who are mobile or travelling:

> Home is not just a place, but also a process of regular patterns and social connections that may be performed and reiterated even while travelling … Rather than becoming impossible in the midst of movement, home continues to matter as a physical and emotional site of belonging (Germann Molz 2008, 330).

As part of the research project we not only gave our participants a camera, but also a specific assignment for what to photograph (which is shown in table 1 below and is inspired by Noland 2006), and we asked them to fill out a photo log with comments on each photo (inspired by Garrod 2008).

Table 1 – Task for participants

We would like you to take two different kinds of pictures of elements in your everyday life, elements which:

– make you feel at home in the region, or
– make you feel like a newcomer in the region

The pictures can be of anything (e.g. objects, places, buildings or persons) just as long as they say: 'This makes me feel at home' or 'This makes me feel like a newcomer', and as long as they somehow relate to your sense of living in the region.

In the task for participants, 'at-homeness' is used as a metaphor to capture the essence of feelings of belonging. Yet, we are well aware that it can be difficult to put into words what it means to 'feel at

home' – or to capture it in a photo – since it is an emotion that involves many different aspects, which all contribute to one's identity and understanding of oneself. As Antonio Cristoforetti et al. (2011) write: 'the space of home – experienced in terms of places and relationships, objects and emotions – includes and completes a person's self-image and sense of identity, understood as expression, identification, belonging, power and appropriation' (Cristoforetti et al. 2011, 226). And yet, at-homeness is also marked by physical objects, social habits, technologies, small daily rituals, relations with other people, etc and, indeed, such things can be captured in photos (see also Haldrup and Larsen 2010). The assignment of having to take photos of their everyday sense of feeling at home or not feeling at home might even sharpen the attention of the participants to their local surroundings. Previous experiences with the use of VEP show that informants, when given a camera, seem to be more observing and reflexive (Garrod 2008; Chase, Carlisle and Becker 1993). This notion has been confirmed by our participants, who have reported that when provided with a camera by us, they were forced to reflect on their everyday activities and engagement with their surroundings.

An Emergent Visual Landscape of Belonging

We asked each photographer to take at least 12 pictures. However, we received 473 photos in total, as several participants delivered more than 12, and all completed the task. The photos and their adjacent comments from the photo log were then stored in Nvivo (a qualitative data analysis software), where we coded them depending both on what they illustrated and what the participant noted in his/her comments. Looking at the categories that emerged from this coding process, it is clearly the case that a number of categories refer to physical surroundings, such as 'buildings', 'city-spaces' or 'nature'. However, some categories also relate to far less tangible aspects of place affiliation and belonging, such as the categories 'job opportunities and working culture', 'perceptions of Danish mentality' and 'meeting the welfare state'. In comparison to previous literature, at this early stage of our analyses we already detect a pattern similar to that identified by Judith Sixsmith (1986) – namely 'personal, social and physical' – as well as Per Gustafson's (2001) model encompassing 'self, others and environment', with various intermediary positions between these poles. By visualizing their everyday belonging in the region of North Denmark through the photos, our participants have outlined a landscape of belonging which, at the abstract level, corresponds with findings from the separate interview-based studies by Sixsmith and Gustafson: a fact which seems both

theoretically intriguing and methodologically reassuring. Turning to the level of detail, however, a much richer picture emerges, which opens up interpretations of how one´s gender, family situation, history of migration etc may influence one´s everyday sense of belonging.

According to Lynne C. Manzo (2003), research on place affiliation and belonging has tended to phrase this as rootedness and comfort 'and has not explored the role of negative/ambivalent feelings and experiences as fully' (Manzo 2003, 48). Yet, it appears from our findings that the experience of feeling at home need not be connected only to something positive. It can also concern negative experiences in one's home country – such as when one participant photographed heavy industry on the harbour front (see picture 2), commenting that this was a familiar scenario. However, the subject believed that more needed to be done to combat pollution in this new setting, hence the image evoked negative aspects of his country of origin. Similarly, the feeling of being a newcomer can be connected both to something exciting/interesting, but also to more negative experiences. Two new experiences which many participants commented on in a positive way were the existence of a 'biking culture' in North Denmark, and the fact that many reported feeling safe and secure when moving about in public space (see picture 3). But there are also examples of

Picture 2 (male, Bangladesh): Although I come from a developing country, our industrial exhaust system is not so developed. Here I see, the exhaust is so white.

Picture 3 (male, India): Late night walk through this path: I was afraid I would be robbed if I went alone. Nothing happened, even though it was late night. I feel very safe living and travelling in North Denmark.

new and negative experiences: for example, photos of police stations and other bureaucratic institutions of the Danish welfare state, which are in some instances perceived as control mechanisms designed to monitor foreigners' compliance with the rules and regulations of Danish society in particular, and transnational mobility in general. Hence, reminding our participants of their status as non-citizens, and underlining the need to draw participants' nationality into the analysis in intersection with gender, class, age, etc.

As already noted, there is little previous research on place af-

Picture 4 (male, India): Being a newcomer, I am so surprised reading the rules and regulations regarding children like paternity leave for husbands, special allowances by the municipality etc. The importance Danes give to their family really astonished me.

filiation, belonging and mobility that takes on a gender perspective. Having yet to complete our analysis of the entire dataset, we do, however, see evidence that gender and gender relations may play a role. Like Tovi Fenster (2005), we thus find that an important dimension of everyday belonging is that it evolves through men's and women's spatial understanding of their surroundings. Our findings differ, however, regarding the significance of parenthood. Fenster concludes that for the women in her study, 'their role as mothers is one of the significant aspects of their embodied knowledge as related to the notion of belonging' while 'the men, on the other hand, didn't mention their fatherhood as a significant indicator' (Fenster 2005, 244). In contrast to Fenster's findings, fatherhood as well as motherhood seem to be a significant dimension in the experience of belonging for our participants. For example, several participants took pictures of the local maternity ward, commenting both on the involvement of fathers at childbirth, the possibilities for parental leave and obtaining a work-life balance, and the extent of the social security system in general (see picture 4). Others provided comments on facilities for children in the urban environment and the involvement of fathers in childrearing.

Yet, there were also other ways in which gender emerged as a key factor, e.g. some of our photographers

commented on the exposure of female bodies in public space. This included a photo of a down-town strip club clearly advertizing in the street, a photo of a visibly pregnant bride in front of the registrar's office and photos of mannequins in lingerie-shops (see picture 5) – in several cases, participants wrote in the photo log that such images would have been an unthinkable scenario in their country of origin.

Picture (male, Hungary): It makes me feel like a newcomer, that dummies suggest a sexual content to the public. That could never happen in my home country.

Concluding Remarks

We stand at the threshold of what promises to be an exciting analytic endeavor, the contours of which are only beginning to emerge from our visual material. Initially, the photos seem to verify that using visual methodologies is rewarding in the study of place affiliation, mobility, and belonging. Sarah Pink (2012) argues that it is important for the scholar of everyday life not simply to cut out flat slices of it; 'Rather, he or she should find his or her way through this unevenness, following those whose lives, actions and things she or he seeks to understand' (Pink 2012, 34). As a consequence of such considerations, Pink advocates 'a shift away from semiotic analysis towards analysing photographs and other representations through a theory of multisensoriality and place [which] offers an alternative route to knowledge' (Pink 2012, 35).

The application of visual methods in our study of place affiliation, mobility, and belonging seems, so far, to have offered an alternative route to insights into how globally mobile men and women perceive, construct and display their sense of belonging. By employing participants who are known to be mobile across national borders, we argue that we are more than able to suggest 'a bigger landscape beyond' the local (Knowles and Sweetman 2004, 8). Also, the photos open up new ways of conceptualizing the gendered social realities of globalization, in addition to conceptualizations of place affiliation, mobility, and belonging.

References

Back, L. 2007. *The Art of Listening*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Bauman, Z. 1998. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Castells, M. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Castells, M. 1997. *The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. II*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Castells, M. 1998. *End of Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. III*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Chase, D.M., C.L. Carlisle, and R.H. Becker. 1993. Beyond the Eye of the Beholder. Paper presented at Proceeding of the Conference on Livable Places, Charleston, SC March, .

Cherem, G.J., and D.E. Traweek. 1977. Visitor Employed Photography: A Tool for Interpretive Planning on River Environments. In Proceedings River Recreation Management and Research Symposium, USDA Forest Service. *General Technical Report, North Central Forest Experiment Station, USDA Forest Service* (NC-28): 236–44.

Cristoforetti, A., F. Gennai, and G. Rodeschini. 2011. Home Sweet Home: The Emotional Construction of Places. *Journal of Aging Studies*: 225–232.

Cuba, L., and D. M. Hummon. 1993a. Constructing a Sense of Home: Place Affiliation and Migration across the Life Cycle. Paper presented at *Sociological Forum* 8: 547–570.

Cuba, L. and D. M. Hummon. 1993b. A Place to Call Home: Identification with Dwelling, Community, and Region. *The Sociological Quarterly* 34 (1): 111–3.

Davids, T., and F. van Driel. 2005. Changing perspectives. In T. Davids, F. V. Driel eds. *The Gender Question in Globalisation. Changing Perspectives and Practices.* Hants: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Fenster, T. 2005. Gender and the City: The Different Formations of Belonging. In L. Nelson and J. Seager eds. *A Companion to Feminist Geography.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. *A Companion to Feminist Geography*: 242–57.

Freeman, C. 2001. Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26 (84): 1007–1037.

Garrod, B. 2008. Exploring Place Perception a Photo-Based Analysis. *Annals of Tourism Research* 35 (2): 381–40.

Germann Molz, J. 2008. Global Abode. *Space and Culture* 11 (4): 325–42.

Giddens, A. 1999. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives.* London: Profile Books.

Gustafson, P. 2001. Meanings of Place: Everyday Experience and Theoretical Conceptualizations. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 21 (1): 5–16.

Haldrup, M. and J. Larsen. 2010. *Tourism, Performance and the Everyday: Consuming the orient.* New York: Oxon : Routledge.

Knowles, C. and P. Sweetman. 2004. *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods in the Sociological Imagination*. London: Routledge.

Langa, M. 2008. Using Photo-Narratives to Explore the Construction of Young Masculinities. *Psychology in Society* 36: 6–23.

Manzo, L. C. 2003. Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23 (1): 47–61.

McDowell, L. 1999. *Gender, Identity & Place. Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Nelson, L. & J. Seager. 2005. *A Companion to Feminist Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Noland, C. M. 2006. Auto-photography as Research Practice: Identity and Self-Esteem Research. *Journal of Research Practice* 2 (1).

Pink, S. 2012. *Situating Everyday Life*. London: Sage.

Sixsmith, J. 1986. The Meaning of Home: An Exploratory Study of Environmental Experience. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 6 (4): 281–98.

Suchar, C. S. 1988. Photographing the Changing Material Culture of a Gentrified Community. *Visual Studies* 3 (2): 17–21.

Suchar, C. S. 2004. A Tale of Two Cities. *Contexts* 3 (3): 48–55.

Taylor, J.G., K.J. Czarnowski, N.R. Sexton, and S. Flick. 1996. The Importance of Water to Rocky Mountain National Park Visitors: An Adaptation of Visitor-Employed Photography to Natural Resources Management. *Journal of Applied Recreation Research* 20: 61–85.

Urry, J. 2000. *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Next Century*. London: Routledge.